

§ 5

Mr. Siddons it was who first planted the conception of Life as a Career in my mind.

In those talks that did so much towards shaping me into the likeness of a modest, reserved, sporting, seemly, clean and brave, patriotic and decently slangy young Englishman, he was constantly reverting to that view of existence. He spoke of failures and successes, talked of statesmen and administrators, peerages and Westminster Abbey. "Nelson," he said, "was once a clergyman's son like you."

"England has been made by the sons of the clergy."

He talked of the things that led to failure and the things that had made men prominent and famous.

"Discursiveness ruins a man," I remember him saying. "Choose your goal and press to it."

"Never do anything needlessly odd. It's a sort of impertinence to all the endless leaders of the past who created our traditions. Do not commit yourself hastily to opinions, but once you have done so, stick to them. The world would far rather have a firm man wrong, than a weak man hesitatingly right. Stick to them."

"One has to remember," I recall him meditating, far over my head with his face upturned, "that Institutions are more important than Views. Very often one adopts a View only to express one's belief in an Institution.... Men can do with almost all sorts of Views, but only with certain Institutions. All this Doubt doesn't touch a truth like that. One does not refuse to live in a house because of the old symbols one finds upon the door.... If they are old symbols...."

Out of such private contemplations he would descend suddenly upon me.

"What are you going to do with your life, Steve?" he would ask.

"There is no happiness in life without some form of service. Where do you mean to serve? With your bent for science and natural history, it wouldn't be difficult for you to get into the I.C.S. I doubt if you'd do anything at the law; it's a rough game, Steve, though the prizes are big. Big prizes the lawyers get. I've known a man in the Privy Council under forty--and that without anything much in the way of a family.... But always one must concentrate. The one thing England will not stand is a loafer, a wool-gatherer, a man who goes about musing and half-awake. It's our energy. We're western. It's that has made us all we are."

I knew whither that pointed. Never so far as I can remember did Mr. Siddons criticize either myself or my father directly, but I understood with the utmost clearness that he found my father indolent and hesitating, and myself more than a little bit of a mollycoddle, and in

urgent need of pulling together.